

Grand Jury Validation

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, June 20, 2011



A new Grand Jury report says San Jose routinely over-deploys firetrucks, and suggests changes to current rules mandating four firefighters on every call.

In the past, I have written about how fire services are deployed in San Jose with an emphasis on the data that shows the overwhelming ratio of medical calls to actual fires. In addition, I have shared that San Jose's minimum staffing contract requires four people per fire engine while every other city in the county requires three firefighters or less.

The Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury, which investigates waste, fraud and abuse, released its report last week on fire services in the county including San Jose. They found that "these agencies remain entrenched in old service and old cost structures" and that "taxpayers can no longer afford to fund the status quo." The Grand Jury wanted to make a distinction from the 1970s by stating, "it is extremely important to separate the iconography of shiny red trucks and Dalmatians from the reality of today's firefighting." Inevitably all organizations need to change as the touch points that engage them change over time.

The Grand Jury interviewed all fire chiefs and public safety chiefs in Santa Clara County responsible for fire departments plus city managers. They, "generally agreed that fire department operations as currently configured are unsustainable." Unsustainable in that, "it is common to see fire departments over-deploy multiple firefighting apparatus in response to non-life threatening emergencies, seemingly a waste of taxpayer dollars."

Each extra staffing position on a fire engine equals three police officers or approximately six librarians based on covering all the shifts in a month based on the historic 24-hour shift.

Restructuring fire services has zero to do with the actual fire department employee but everything to do with the allocation of resources based on demand and budget. Some of the interviewees described firefighting as "the best part-time job in America" and said "firefighters are paid for 23 hours of sitting around for one hour of work because that is how insurance works." Fair point on the insurance analogy but can this cost be maximized or do we want to increase our insurance premium for police instead?

Also from the report: "Fire departments can be more successful and cost-effective when fire chiefs have the latitude to assign and manage staff according to the situation." San Jose does not have this latitude. Interviewees "describe union pressure to retain minimum-staffing contract clauses, also known as 'entitlement operations.' Yet Fire Chiefs pointed out that there are clear peak and low demands for service on any given day, day of the week or season of the year, such that a more flexible staffing model would make much more sense both administratively and economically. Those cities [like San Jose] with fire contracts mandating minimum staffing levels and crew size are at a disadvantage compared to those with the discretion to staff as needed." It would make sense to have more resources during peak demand time and less during non-peak demand time but not below a certain threshold.

The report also examined consolidation of fire departments across the county to reduce costs by cutting management while maintaining service levels. Consolidation would also look at sharing expensive fire equipment between cities, the cost of maintenance and personnel training.

I believe allowing fire chiefs more flexibility on minimum staffing and length of shifts would enable staffing per peak demand and at the same time produce costs saving for other city services like police.

[Follow this link to review the Grand Jury report.](#)

On a related note, council approved the ambulance contract with the County last week. State law give the County authority over the ambulance contract. Unfortunately our fire department will continue to respond to the jail for medical calls even though the jail has medical personnel on staff and it is the ambulance that actually transports the inmate to the hospital. This is totally unnecessary and [an unnecessary risk to firefighters which I tried changing a few years back.](#)

In addition, the San Jose Fire Department under the County contract will still have to respond to sprained-ankle calls. There is a re-opener on the contract which I hope will allow SJFD to stop responding to both the jail and minor injury calls.

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